Love is a Spendthrift
Luke 10:25-37
November 3, 1974

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Ordinarily the preacher opens up the Parable of the Good Samaritan by way of an attention-catching story that superimposes the familiar components of the Parable onto a contemporary setting. The point is to show that the incident along the Jericho Road keeps happening in life, and that you and I keep looking like the Priest and Levite as we make wide circles around all sorts of suffering people. It has become almost a pulpit cliche, and I will not engage in it this morning inasmuch as I already have done so by telling you about it - but with far fewer words and less drama than the project usually demands.

I would rather approach the Parable by way of two statements which invariably come to my mind whenever I read or hear Luke 10:25-37. The first is a definition that goes: "A parable is a Bible story that sounds like an interesting yarn but 'keeps something up its sleeve which suddenly pops up and leaves you flat' ". (P.G.Wodehouse - in A.M.Hunter, The Parables Then and Now P.53) The Good Samaritan has a way of doing that: a way of knocking us flat with the truth it forces us to confront in ourselves.

The second statement is a vignette from Mark Twain who once allowed as how he was not particularly bothered by what he did not understand about the Bible. Rather, it was what he understood very clearly that bothered him most. I don't know that Twain was thinking about the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but I do know that his sentiment is mine precisely. I understand the parable all too well, and what I understand bothers me a great deal indeed.

So, let us look again at this familiar yarn that "keeps something up its sleeve"; this old and beloved story that makes us so terribly uncomfortable.

The setting is important. A Scribe, a temple lawyer whose occupation it was to interpret religious law, decided to cross rhetorical swords with this young Rabbi by the name of Jesus. "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" It was not a flippant question: in fact, it is the religious question that men have been asking since the beginning of time. The trouble here was that the lawyer already knew the prescribed answer, and Jesus knew that he knew. Centuries before, the rabbis had summarized the law by bringing together several statements from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. Orthodox Jews wore a phylactery, a small leather box, around the wrist containing those statements. And so Jesus simply asked: "How do you read it?" And the lawyer recited the formula that everyone knew, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, mind - and your neighbor as yourself". Jesus said: "Do it", and won the first round. The lawyer had hoped, apparently, to provoke Jesus into a discussion of doctrine, and then catch him in a theological error. But Jesus came down firmly on the law - "Do what is written".

Now, no lawyer worth his credentials, is going to stop with that. And so a second question is asked: "But who is my neighbor?" Again, a good Philadelphia-lawyer-type question: perhaps the legal question in Judaism. Every generation had debated it - In a way we are still debating it. At its broadest, Judaism defined neighbor as any man. At its narrowest, and this was a narrow time, neighbor meant "a fellow Jew".

It is to this question, but more importantly, to this situation that Jesus responded with a story about "A certain man": nationality, race, religion, social position unknown: just a certain man. And in this marvelously disturbing story Jesus moves from the possibility of a discussion of semantics to a stunning discourse on ethics and love and - eternal life - or salvation, which you will recall, was on the lawyer's mind in the first place.

You know the story. Jerusalem sits at 2,300 feet above sea level: Jericho is near the Dead Sea, 1,300 feet below sea level. The road is down: 3,600 feet in 17 miles, through close rocky passes. As recently as 1930 it was no road to travel alone. So the victim discovered - attacked, beaten, robbed, he was left to die. A priest and Levite - both religious officials, saw the man and passed by on the other side of the road. A Samaritan - whose very name was synonymous with "Half-breed - heretic", saw the man, took him to an inn and provided for his continued recovery.

Now, the Priest and Levite, please understand, broke no law. There was nothing in their religious code that prescribed what to do when one finds a wounded man lying in the ditch. In fact, as often happens, the particularities of their religion were a major factor in preventing them from stopping. Their law determined that a man was unclean for seven days if he touched a dead body: the victim probably looked dead. If he was, and if either had touched him they could not have taken their turn in official Temple duties for one week. Besides, it was a known fact that highway bandits on the Jericho road often left a victim as a decoy in order to surprise any traveler who happened to stop. And besides they both probably had important business to attend to: someone once suggested that they were on their way to a Jerusalem meeting to discuss the dangerous conditions on the highway. There were a hundred good reasons for passing by and none, apparently, for stopping.

The Samaritan, however, felt something when he saw the battered victim lying by the road. He "had compassion" which is something the Priest and Levite did not have. And acting on that compassion he did something. He lavished extravagant care on the man. He was a spendthrift. He did all that could be expected and more. There was no limit to his love. The Kingdom of God, Jesus was saying, is like that. Eternal life is inherited when you act like that - God's Kingdom is a reality in life - when you stop by the roadside and help a man in need.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a favorite not only because it is a good story, but also because it says so very much that is important.

It teaches, for instance, that my neighbor is any man who needs me. He may or may not live near to me: he may or may not be similar to me in terms of race, religion, class - my neighbor is the man whose needs I can see and about which I am able to do something. Dwight L Moody put it simply: "...Everyman is my brother and when I see him hurt I am under orders to go and heal."

The parable teaches an ethic in which love and compassion for another human being transcend law. It teaches that God cares about people, not rules.

The parable presents Christianity as a process that may begin theoretically in a discussion but soon must be expressed in concrete acts. We are particularly vulnerable here, I believe. Too frequently we regard our religion as a matter of believing certain doctrines: but Jesus consistently told his followers to love certain people. Edward Huenemann observes that "...it is at the point of practicality that the Biblical understanding of love is often sacrificed. No one would be so bold as to suggest that Christians ought not to be loving, but someone might question to what degree and in what way love should be more than pious sentiment". (Love and Justice, Monday Morning 11/1/71)

Each of those directions is a complete area of inquiry and discussion. But there is one other which, I would submit, is the most relevant of all for us in this time and in this place. The key, it seems to me, is in that little statement that the Samaritan, when he saw the man "had compassion". And I would like to explore that briefly, in the context of our culture.

In an excellent book, Love and Will, Dr. Rollo May, distinguished psychologist and psychiatrist, describes a marvelous television picture that came out of the Vietnam War. Tear gas cannisters had been thrown into holes and huts to drive out of hiding any remaining Viet Cong. But, only women and children emerged. One child, about two, routed out with his mother, sat on her lap looking up at a large Marine, who was black. The side of the child's face was dirty with smoke and soot.....he had been crying. He looked up with an expression of bewilderment, now beyond crying, not knowing what to make of such a world. The camera shifted immediately to the American Marine looking down at the child.....his stare did not move, remaining fixed on that child....."

May speculates about what the Marine was feeling and concludes, "I think he sees there another human being with a common base of humanity on which they pause for a moment in the swamps of Vietnam. His look is care....Care is a state composed of the recognition of another, a fellow human being like oneself; of identification of one's self with the pain or joy of the other..." (Love and Will P.288-289)

What the television camera caught on the Marine's face; what the Samaritan felt in his heart - care or compassion - is a fragile and precious thing. It is, I submit, the noblest human emotion: the most Christ-like feeling. And yet, more and more we are realizing that it is missing in much of our common life.

Now let us differentiate between caring and sentimentality. Tolstoi wrote about elegant Russian ladies who wept at the theater but had no regard for their coachmen who were waiting for them outside the theater in sub-zero weather. That is sentimentality. Caring is the ability to feel with someone and then the inclination to do something about the object of one's feeling.

But the very nature of our culture seems to conspire against that happening. There is, I believe, a desperate need today for personal caring - in the midst of the impersonal structures of our society. Someone has to translate the concept of "poverty" into that certain family - those particular people who today do not have any food to eat. Someone has to translate the category "Senior Citizen" into Mrs. Brown, who is lonely, who remembers the way it used to be around the dinner table, who likes sugar cookies, and whose arthritis hurts every night. Someone in war has to reduce "body counts" into individual men and widows and fatherless children. Someone has to have the courage to weep - publicly - to care.

It is not an easy thing to do. Our culture is a little skeptical of compassionate men. We start out by teaching little boys not to cry. We teach our children that it's best to be tough. And we proceed through adulthood trying desperately not to reveal the deeply human feelings in our hearts.

Beyond that, incredibly, we have allowed feelings of compassion to become suspect politically. To care too much - to express too much compassion is to risk being derided as a "bleeding heart", - an epitaph - it seems to me - followers of Jesus Christ ought to be pursuing and wearing with pride rather than avoiding.

The lesson of the Parable, I believe, hangs on the slender thread of compassion. Notice that it was a personal thing with the Samaritan. Certainly he should have reported the incident to the authorities. Better yet, he should have organized his friends and tried to improve conditions along the road. But the point of the parable is that compassion issues in service that is intensely personal. That is a word I think we need to hear very clearly.

The Jericho Road for us is wider and longer and infinitely more complex than it was for the Samaritan. The victims lying by its side are numbered in terms of entire nations, races, minorities. We think in terms of social problems, political problems, economic problems. And as the people of God we are called to exercise our love and compassion in ways that are socially and politically effective. The Church of Jesus Christ ought to be a force for humanization, compassion and justice, and an implacable foe of whatever hurts, divides or oppresses mankind. Together, we are doing that in the Neighborhood Ministries of our Church: Together, with United Presbyterians all over the country we are corporately kneeling by the road to bind up wounds of people on six continents. But, as individuals, we walk a portion of that road every day. And in small, personal situations each of us is called to care and love and heal in the name of our Lord: situations in which only we can help: situations that we can pass by. We do confront hurting, bleeding people every day! We do confront lonely neighbors; and friends whose marriage has gone sour, and acquaintances whose families are strained. We do confront each other in fear about surgery next week, or concern about the loss of employment, grief over the death of a loved one. And sometimes all that's required is to care enough to listen and to say "I hurt with you. I hurt because you hurt". In many ways, that road-side encounter is replayed in our lives. And love's imperative is that we never pass by on the other side.

There is, finally, Gospel in the Parable: the Good News that God loves - as the Samaritan loved, in that same compassionate, extravagant, spendthrift way. In Jesus Christ he has knelt by the roadside of life - to take us seriously - to identify with us - to share our burdens and our joys. The gods on Mt. Olympus didn't care about the affairs of men: they were serenely detached from the pain and joy of humankind. Greek philosophy taught that stoic acceptance of pain and joy was the good and righteous way to live. "Jesus Christ", in William Barclay's words, "came to tell men of a God who cares desperately, a God who is involved in the human situation....a God who is concerned". (Ethics in a Permissive Society. P.31)

To believe in that God and to follow that Christ is to love and to be a spendthrift in love. In terms of Stewardship, for instance, it is not "what do I owe, or how much should I give?" but "how do I go about giving all? How do I live my life for the sake of Jesus Christ and my neighbor who needs me?"

The love of God, as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ, is a spendthrift. - It comes to us where we are: In Christ, God himself has identified with the human condition. The best of the Good News - is that God cares about us... and...

When we have compassion, when we care, and when, in love, we give and help and heal, we are I believe, privileged to usher in a little bit of God's Kingdom on earth.

Amen